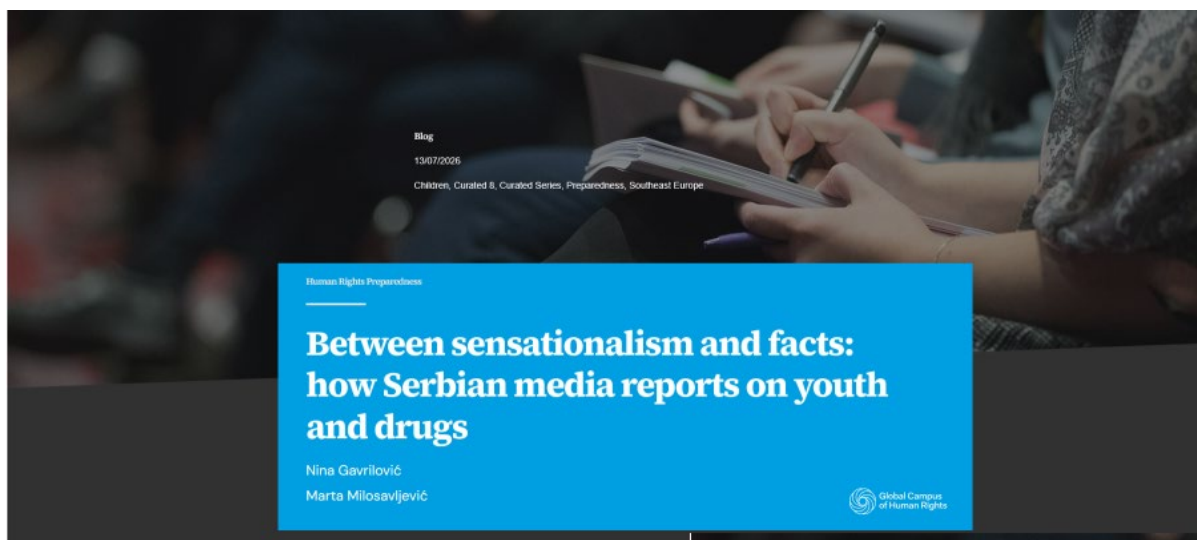




Between sensationalism and facts: how Serbian media reports on youth and drugs

Nina Gavrilović* and Marta Milosavljević**

Abstract: An analysis of five Serbian tabloid articles on youth and drugs identifies a sustained pattern of sensationalist framing, stigmatising language, and absent public health context, offering key recommendations for more responsible reporting.

Media have the power to actively shape social attitudes toward complex issues, and the language and framing used in reporting are not merely stylistic choices, they carry real-world consequences for how societies understand and respond to problems. This post analyses how Serbian media cover youth and drug use, focusing on reporting around drug deaths involving minors, police actions in schools, and trends in youth substance use. Our analysis draws on five news articles from Serbian tabloids, including reader comment sections, and compares the findings against international reporting standards and human rights guidelines to better understand the broader impact of this kind of coverage on young people.

Conceptual framework

According to researcher [Sarah Zaklama](#), media framing refers to the way outlet's structure information to shape the public's interpretation of events and issues. Editors

* Nina Gavrilović is a 19 year old student from Lazarevac, Serbia. She studies Statistics at the University of Belgrade and has been actively involved for years in science, journalism, and human rights advocacy. She is particularly interested in topics such as education, equality, and media, and dreams of one day using mathematical models to advance human rights. She is a member of the Youth Advisory Group ([YAG](#)) for Southeast Europe at the Global Campus of Human Rights.

** Marta Milosavljević is a high school student from Vranje, Serbia. She has been a member of the Child Leadership Team ([CLT](#)) for Southeast Europe at the Global Campus of Human Rights since 2022. She is interested in topics related to children's rights, technology, media, and human rights.

can choose which aspects of a story to emphasise or omit, and those choices directly affect public opinion and policy. When it comes to drug use, [framing can position](#) the issue as a criminal matter, a moral failure, or a public health concern; these are three very different frames with very different consequences for how individuals and institutions respond.

Closely related is the concept of stigmatising language: words that create negative stereotypes and reduce people to a single characteristic. [Terms like 'addict'](#) carry strong moral judgement and undermine the dignity of people who use drugs. A human right-based approach to addiction, endorsed by [international organisations](#), prioritises care, access to services, and anonymity over punishment and shame. Our analysis found that Serbian tabloid media diverge significantly from these key standards.

How Serbian media cover young people and drugs

Sensationalist coverage of youth and drugs in Serbian tabloids is not an isolated occurrence; it is a sustained and systematic pattern. We have analysed five examples. The first is an [Informer article](#) headlined 'Shocking data: minors in Serbia hooked on hard drugs, the youngest addict is only 10 years old'. The word 'shocking' signals that alarm and disgust are the correct responses, not empathy, while 'junkie' is applied to a minor who is a victim requiring urgent care. Readers' comments reveal the real-world effect: one called for young users to be 'isolated from society' and another suggested a minefield would be 'the right place for them'. The article also refers to children being coerced into drug dealing by older peers as a 'trend' and a 'hit', reducing criminal exploitation and peer violence to a teenage fad.

A second [Informer article](#) about a legal energy powder is headlined 'They snort it right in the middle of school' and 'legal cocaine floods Serbia'. Deliberately borrowing vocabulary from the world of illicit drug use, the article functions as a pure alarm directed at parents. No references to state responsibility, health consequences, or factual context are offered.

A [Blic article](#) on a teenager who overdosed on ecstasy piles on emotional eyewitness statements and phrases like 'dying in the greatest agony' and 'a lethal amount five times the fatal dose'. The incident is framed because of nightlife and individual irresponsibility rather than a public health matter. No references to educational information, helplines, or prevention guidance appear anywhere in the article.

A second [Blic piece](#) links two separate overdose deaths in a single headline, 'Two tragedies strike Novi Sad', manufacturing the impression of a spreading mass phenomenon. An anonymous 'source familiar with the investigation' is cited as a classic tabloid device that implies exclusivity while blocking fact-checking. The article implies a cause of death based on witness statements while simultaneously admitting those statements cannot be treated as reliable evidence.

Finally, an [Espresso article](#) headlined 'DEVASTATING! Serbian kids drink like crazy, every fourth one also does drugs' initially cites an official study and quotes psychiatrists, giving an impression of informative reporting. Once the reader's attention is secured, however, statistical data about youth substance use is redeployed to portray an entire generation as heading toward ruin. A psychiatrist's use of the term '*narkomanija*' is quoted approvingly, reducing young people experiencing addiction to

a single derogatory label. No analysis of root causes, no advice, and no helplines are included.

What our analysis shows

Across all five articles, a consistent and deeply problematic pattern is visible. The primary goal is to induce fear and alarm, particularly among parents, through catastrophic headline language and the listing of separate incidents without statistical context, creating the impression of uncontrolled, epidemic-like phenomena. Young people who use substances are dehumanised, criminalised, and labelled rather than portrayed as individuals in need of medical and psychological support. Terms like 'junkie' (i.e., 'narkoman') and 'to get hooked on drugs' appear regularly, attaching permanent stigma and suggesting that these young people are wholly defined by their behaviour.

There is a near-total absence of institutional accountability: the state, health services, schools, and social support systems are never questioned or held responsible. Blame falls on bad parenting, individual irresponsibility, or nightlife culture. Alongside this sits a complete absence of education, no helplines, no prevention guidance, no psychological or medical information for readers. As both the [Amnesty International Drug Policy Paper](#) and [Child Rights framework](#) make clear, this approach produces the opposite of responsible reporting: it builds a wall of shame that causes families to conceal problems and delay seeking help, while structural causes, poverty, underfunded mental health services, social exclusion, go entirely unexamined. Nobody asks why social support for vulnerable youth is so limited, or why accessible mental health services are so scarce.

Recommendations

The most immediate change required is the adoption of a non-stigmatising, person-first language: 'a person who uses drugs' or 'a young person experiencing drug dependence' rather than 'junkie' or 'addict'. Research by [Kelly and Westerhoff](#) shows that stigmatising terms increase social distance and bias among both the public and healthcare professionals, and [multiple studies](#) confirm they reduce the likelihood that people will seek professional help. [NIDA](#) documents that language directly shapes societal attitudes toward addiction.

Second, drug use should be framed consistently as a public health issue. Reporting would benefit from directing accountability questions at institutions: are there enough community mental health centres? What prevention programmes exist in schools? How do poverty, trauma, and lack of opportunity drive addiction? Articles should routinely include helplines, contacts for civil society organisations offering free psychological and legal support, and guidance on where families can turn.

More broadly, the most durable response to sensationalist reporting is improving media literacy among citizens of all ages. Tabloids derive their power from clicks and attention. Recognising these framing patterns, the manufactured alarm, the dehumanising labels, the missing institutional accountability, and changing our own habits as readers is ultimately what reduces the commercial incentive to produce this kind of coverage.